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SUBJECT: CODEL HAGEL CALLS ON MINISTER OF DEFENSE, COLONEL GENERAL
PHUNG QUANG THANH

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) On October 6, Senator Hagel called on Vietnam's new Minister of Defense, Colonel General Phung Quang Thanh. During this meeting, Colonel General Thanh reviewed the positive trend in bilateral military relations, and noted several key areas where the U.S.-Vietnam defense relationship could grow. Senator Hagel inquired about Vietnam's ongoing efforts to modernize its military forces, to combat terrorism, and also about how the different elements of the People's Armed Forces work together to carry out their various missions. Thanh provided straightforward answers, underscoring that the military in Vietnam serves defend Vietnam, the Communist Party and the current political structure. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On October 6, Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE) engaged Vietnam's new Minister of Defense, Colonel General Phung Quang Thanh in a cordial, but substantive, discussion of the challenges facing Vietnam's military. The Senator was accompanied by the CDA, professional staff member Rixon Ryu, and military escort Lieutenant Colonel Gregg Olson, as well as by a control officer and an Embassy notetaker.

Thanh Reviews Relations; Gives a Positive Spin

¶3. (SBU) Colonel General Thanh thanked Senator Hagel for his visit and expressed appreciation for his longtime contributions to the bilateral relationship, as well as his ongoing efforts to support the granting of PNTR and Vietnam's accession to the WTO. Senator Hagel thanked the Minister for his welcome and provided an overview of his trip to Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam - countries of key geopolitical importance for the United States. Of these, he noted that the U.S.-Vietnam relationship was considered to be important to the United States. He suggested that efforts by both countries to promote trade would continue to promote security in the region, and that the continuing growth of bilateral defense cooperation in areas of common interest could contribute positively to both countries security interests. The Senator asked Colonel General Thanh to share his thoughts and opinions on the current state of mil-mil relations and also about areas where cooperation could potentially be expanded.

¶4. (SBU) Colonel General Thanh characterized the current mil-mil relationship as very positive and opined that he believed that the bilateral defense relationship provides a good contribution to the

overall bilateral relationship. He further noted that the bilateral defense relationship should continue to be built within the context of the overall bilateral relationship and thus be oriented towards promoting stability and the fostering of a long-term relationship. He stated that the mil-mil relationship should serve the cause of peace, stability, cooperation and development in both the region and the world. He stated that both sides have taken constructive and active steps toward that end. He recalled that Defense Ministers of both countries have recently exchanged visits, and that the Commander of U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) had recently paid a visit. He also noted that Vietnam's military research institutes have held exchanges with U.S. military personnel, and that there has been much other cooperation in the field of education and training. Colonel General Thanh also noted the at least one U.S. naval warship has visited Vietnam's ports each year, and he expressed appreciation for U.S. assistance in addressing the problems of unexploded ordnance, landmines and toxic chemical contamination. He also expressed his appreciation for the productive cooperation between USPACOM military medical personnel and the People's Army Military Medical Department in fighting HIV/AIDS. He asked Senator Hagel to pass on his personal thanks to USPACOM for its assistance in caring for one of the PAVN officers who fell on during a recent trip to Honolulu, HI and who required significant medical attention. Finally, he thanked Senator Hagel for U.S. assistance in funding the two military officers currently studying at the Defense Language Institute's English Language Training Center in Texas, and asked for additional assistance to provide more language and technical training to Vietnam's military officers in the years to come.

15. (SBU) Colonel General Thanh noted past successful cooperation by both countries to resolve MIA cases, and called attention to efforts by Vietnam to assist U.S. activities in this area, especially in the central highlands and other sensitive mountainous areas. He thanked the United States for the provision of archival records that have helped in the recovery of Vietnam's own MIAs, and he suggested that the GVN is seriously considering permitting U.S. naval vessels to conduct MIA recovery efforts in Vietnam's territorial waters; however, he noted that certain areas in the eastern sea continue to

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be in dispute and the presence of U.S. naval vessels could be perceived wrongly.

16. (SBU) Colonel General Thanh also suggested that Vietnam would welcome further U.S. assistance in addressing wartime legacy issues, especially in the area of cleaning-up "toxic hotspots." He added that another area of possible cooperation is in counter-terrorism. He noted that Vietnam currently enjoys social and political stability, but the GVN recognizes the value of sharing experiences and information with the United States in this area so that both countries can continue to enjoy peace and stability.

17. (SBU) Colonel General Thanh pointed out that Lieutenant General Nguyen Duc Soat, he standing Vice-Chairman of Vietnam's National Search and Rescue Committee (and also a Deputy Chief of the General Staff), is currently leading a delegation of search and rescue specialists to the United States on a fact finding tour. He added that he hoped that the United States and Vietnam could work together more closely in fighting against the effects of natural disasters. He pointed out that Vietnamese fishing vessels often get caught-up in storms and he indicated that the GVN would welcome U.S. help in coming to their assistance. He also suggested that the GVN would welcome USPACOM assistance in meteorological and oceanographic (METOC) prediction in order to mitigate the effects of typhoons.

Hagel: Condolences; Your Biggest Challenge?

18. (SBU) Senator Hagel thanked Colonel General Thanh for his comments and expressed his condolences on behalf of the U.S. Congress and the American people for the loss of life in recent typhoon. He also noted that the U.S. Embassy would soon announce the availability of funds to assist survivors. He expressed his appreciation for the Minister's ideas about ways to grow the bilateral defense relationship, and inquired about the biggest challenges currently being faced by Vietnam's army in its attempts

to modernize its forces.

People, Advanced Weaponry

19. (SBU) Colonel General Thanh replied that like many other countries in the world, Vietnam is trying to reduce its number of active-duty forces while simultaneously raising the quality of its weapons systems. He lamented that despite many remarkable economic achievements, Vietnam remains a relatively poor country and cannot contribute as much as it would like to the army's program of weapons modernization. Despite the fact that Vietnam's defense doctrine relies both on weapons systems and human resources, Vietnam's poverty compels it to emphasize the latter. He added that Vietnam depends on levee en masse, but that the active army constitutes the vanguard and leading force of the armed forces. He stated that great attention is paid to synergizing the training and operation of both forces to ensure that Vietnam's human resource contribution to defense is adequate for its mission, which is primarily to preserve Vietnam's territorial integrity against foreign invaders.

Terrorism

10. (SBU) Senator Hagel then asked about how Vietnam's army feels about the threat of terrorism and if Vietnam felt it was vulnerable to that threat. Colonel General Thanh replied that many countries in the region have recently had problems with terrorism, and that even Vietnam has had problems in the central highlands and other remote mountainous areas, especially where there are many ethnic minorities. He added that the GVN has not yet eliminated the problem with remaining elements of United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO) and that there is always the threat that outside forces will try to negatively influence the relatively uneducated rural inhabitants of these areas. He suggested that it would be unlikely that well-educated urban dwellers would be susceptible to this influence and that therefore the threat of terrorism there is minimal.

Military and Police Roles; Intelligence

11. (SBU) Senator Hagel followed up with a question about the relationship between Vietnam's army and its security forces. Colonel General Thanh explained that the People's Army and the People's Security Forces are both constituent elements of the People's Armed Forces, and that both operate under the leadership and guidance of the Communist Party, as well as that of the

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government. While both forces work together very closely to protect the Communist Party, the state and the government, the army is primarily responsible for ensuring Vietnam's territorial integrity, which includes fighting against the threat of terrorism and in mitigating the consequences of natural disasters. He stated that the primary mission of the security forces is to ensure social order and political stability, as well as to fight crime, including transnational crime. Police forces play the leading role in fighting terrorism, but the army has an obligation to cooperate and assist where it can. Colonel General Thanh added that for over sixty years, both forces have worked in close cooperation in support of the party, which is why the leaders of both forces are not only cabinet ministers, but are also members of the Politburo.

12. (SBU) Senator Hagel also asked if the Minister of Defense had oversight of intelligence activities. Colonel General Thanh affirmed that intelligence units do report to him on a daily basis because he is also the army's senior military officer. Senator Hagel then asked if the Minister of Foreign Affairs also received the same intelligence reports, and Colonel General Thanh indicated that although other ministers receive intelligence reports, they did not receive the same reports as he receives, nor do they receive them as frequently.

13. (SBU) Senator Hagel wrapped up visit by again thanking Colonel General Thanh for Vietnam's contributions to the bilateral defense

relationship and offered his hopes that the relationship would continue to grow. Responding in kind, Minister of Defense Thanh wished the Senator and his staff good health and asked his continued support for upcoming efforts to promote bilateral trade and defense cooperation.

Embassy Comment

¶14. (SBU) Minister of Defense Thanh was poised, relaxed, positive and frank throughout the entire meeting. He responded clearly and unambiguously to every inquiry posed by Senator Hagel and offered a number of constructive ideas to expand the bilateral defense relationship. The Minister signaled a clear desire to continue the positive, if cautious, trend in bilateral relations, and expressed a willingness to consider expanding the mil-mil envelope a bit more than past visits have indicated. In particular, his indication that the MOD is considering requests to use U.S. ships to perform underwater MIA recovery missions is new.

¶15. (U) This cable was cleared by JPAC Detachment Two and Senator Hagel's staff.

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